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ABSTRACT

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# Information Desk: Testing a Prescribed Model in the Local Environment

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## ABSTRACT

The following study was conducted in order to ascertain the need for an information desk in a large research library with decentralized reference service where, on the basis of a preponderance of evidence in the available literature, a considerable demand for such a service would be expected. The desk was operated and information regarding inquiries was collected during three separate periods between January 1976 and October 1977. Analysis of this data reveals that, contrary to expectations, significant demand for services usually provided by an information desk is limited to only a few weeks per year.

## Introduction

There is increasing evidence that nearly half of the questions asked at the reference desk in a large academic library are routine, simple, directional inquiries.[1] While these are essential to the user's orientation in the library, they detract in terms of time and attention from the ability of the reference librarian to respond to more complex reference questions that require concentrated searches and user instruction. Although it is in the interest of good library service to meet users' needs for simple directions, it is at the same time in the interest of good library management to maximize the efficiency of the reference department and other service points in their primary functions. Some academic libraries have found a solution by providing a service dedicated to answering routine directional questions--an information desk.

In two surveys reported by Kleiner and Harrelson the information desk is conceived as a simple or "ready" reference station located prominently near the main entrance to the library; its functions may be narrowly defined as only face-to-face locational information and referrals, or it may include phone service, instruction in library use, and limited reference service with the aid of some reference tools.[2] Both studies found that nearly half of the academic libraries sampled has an information desk, and Harrelson found that the existence of an information desk is correlated with a decentralized system of reference.[3] Such a correlation is no surprise, since a dispersed reference system logically and actually requires

some amount of referral assistance in order to match patrons with appropriate, specialized reference librarians.

The fact that many libraries have information desks, and that these are correlated with a system of decentralized reference, would seem to recommend the service unit for many large academic libraries. However, the needs of the "typical" library, whether academic, public, or other, as determined by surveys of large numbers of institutions, and recommendations following from such studies, must be interpreted for their suitability to any local library environment. This is true particularly where an information desk is a new service and requires the allocation of scarce resources, measured in staff time if not equipment and materials. Planners might consider, for example, the architectural configuration of the library interior in relation to the organization of services in the library--a relation which may not be optimal. The visual impact on entry to the library--the visibility of various forms of personal and impersonal assistance--makes the library appear approachable and intelligible as a complex information system. Other considerations, in deciding the need for an information desk, are university-wide educational policies, library service goals and procedures, the size and composition of the user community, the size and composition of the collection, and fiscal and managerial latitude in monitoring operations and making changes. The study described below sought to determine the parameters of local need for an information desk and found these were far more modest than might be expected from generalized studies.

Reference service at the University of Chicago Library is decentralized;

it comprises a main reference department and additional specialized librarians located on seven floors. Because the reference desk is not visible from the entrance of the Library, and the circulation desk--the only visible service point--is not staffed to deal with the information needs of patrons other than those pertaining specifically to matters of circulation, an information desk was experimentally inaugurated in January, 1976, by the Public Services Division of the Library. Its purpose was twofold: 1) to provide assistance to and alleviate the confusion of patrons entering the Library and 2) to determine what kinds of needs users would express if given the opportunity to have questions answered at a readily available and clearly identified service point.

The desk was located in the center of the library's entrance lobby, with the intent of answering directly any questions which did not require the staff to leave the desk, and referring patrons to appropriate resources or departments within the library where indicated. Subsidiary goals were: 1) generally improved public relations, 2) development of a card file containing information frequently requested which would make the service more efficient,[4] and, 3) collection of data on the nature, extent, and patterns through time of service the desk actually provided. It did not, however, provide catalog assistance beyond explaining an entry in the infrequent case when a patron brought the entire catalog drawer to the desk. Nor did the information desk provide any reference service as such. The desk was staffed by professional librarians who volunteered to attend the desk. All were asked to make a record of their interations with patrons at the desk in order to determine empirically the quantity and

nature of service provided. With the aid of this data, operation of the desk could be subsequently tailored to meet peak demands and curtailed or eliminated during periods of low demand. The study was also expected to clarify the role of the information desk and facilitate optimal staffing of the desk in light of its role in the library's overall mission as an information service. Design of the experimental service described here followed the guidelines recommended by Kleiner.[5]

## Data

There are three data sets, all based on the same questionnaire, for three different periods of time:

| | Total #weeks | Total #hours | Total #ques | Avg. # of ques. per week | Avg. # of ques. per hour |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fall 1977 (Orientation Weeks) | 2.5 | 77 | 2056 | 822.4 | 26.7 |
| Fall 1976 (Orientation Weeks) | 2 | 51 | 938 | 469 | 18.4 |
| Winter 1976 (Full Quarter) | 11 | 355 | 2545 | 231.4 | 7.2 |

Initially questionnaires represented all the interactions with a given staff member for the duration of his or her service at the desk on any single day, which duration varied from one to five hours and averaged overall about 1.5 hours. In later stages of the study, staff was instructed to use a separate questionnaire for each hour, irrespective of whether a single person staffed the desk for several hours. The advantage of this method of recording was a break-down of responses by hour. The questionnaire provided a list of anticipated questions and space to record in narrative form those unspecified. Documenting the number and distribution of questions

over periods of time was thus a matter of counting hash marks or recorded remarks. Determining the nature or types of questions asked, however, was not such a simple, mechanical task.[6] In the present study the classification of questions by type was arrived at inductively after the data had been collected, and some interpretation was, therefore, necessarily involved in coding. For example, the classification system makes a distinction between questions about the location of objects and questions about library regulations regarding their use, while a recorded remark stating simple "lockers" could mean: "Where are lockers located in the library?" or "Where might I rent the use of lockers in this library and what are the terms?" Fortunately, however, most questionnaires contained more explicit information than this example, and there were few trouble cases since the four major coding categories are discrete, and there was rarely any doubt where a given question should be assigned.

The four categories of the classification system are: 1) questions on extra-university activities or institutions, e.g., getting a taxi, using another library; 2) intra-university but extra-library, e.g., where is the administration building, how to register; 3) library related locations, services, and regulations, including reference; and 4) other, e.g., how are you today, what is that picture doing on the wall. (Distribution of questions among major categories is shown in Table 1.)

In coding questions about the library, the classificatory schema is based on the usual distinctions of relative complexity and need for specialized or professional knowledge and experience to provide an adequate answer.[7] Within the major category of questions about the library (category 3), then, an attempt was made to separate questions which could be answered with the aid

of printed guides and maps, e.g., the hours of the library, locations of call numbers in the stacks, etc., on the one hand, from those requiring more sophisticated knowledge, e.g., how to find particular information using reference sources, on the other. Thus requests for assistance received at the information desk were grouped as follows: General information, where the patron was referred to printed or posted material or informed about library tours; Spatial orientation, often called "directional" in other surveys,[8] where the patron could be directed with the use of floor plans; Procedural orientation, where the patron could be instructed, in most cases, with simple policy guidelines; and, Intellectual orientation, where the patron would be assisted in using library materials, interpreting the catalog or reference tools, doing research, etc. (Distribution of questions relating to the library among these categories is shown on Table 2.)

Subclasses within these categories are fairly specific and, in actual compilation, more highly differentiated than the tables show; but for economy of presentation highlights at the finest level of differentiation are not given a full tabular display. Where questions seemed too ambiguous to be assigned to a single subclass with confidence, they were combined and coded under a superordinate major grouping at a level of generality sufficient to eliminate any doubt about their assignment. For example, "periodicals" questions were all moved to "intellectual orientation" because evidence from this and other studies[9] indicates that users experience a great deal of difficulty in using serials which is manifest initially as an ostensible problem of location. We found that nearly half of all questions about locating materials--by subject, title, or type, answered directly at the information desk--concerned periodicals.

## Findings

### 1. Types of Questions (Table 1)

Most of the questions asked at the information desk--roughly 90%--were about the library rather than extra-library matters, and this figure was constant regardless of the time period during which the sample was taken, indicating that the desk was not, in the main, performing the function of a university-wide information service. Proportionately more questions about the university at large were asked in Fall 1977, however, presumably because more new students were required to come through the library lobby close upon their arrival at the University, as student I.D. photos were taken in the library.

### 2. Types of Questions about the Library (Table 2)

During orientation weeks, 60% of the questions about the library were requests for general information or locations of library components or services, virtually all of which information was available in the form of a Library Handbook or by means of tours and floor plans. Another 20% of the questions were concerned with library regulations and procedures--for the most part library hours and locker rental. Thus 80% of the questions about the library asked at the information desk could be answered without specialized knowledge or experience, relying only on printed guides and instructions already available to library patrons as handouts, and this figure is consistent with the findings of other similar studies.[10] Other questions on intellectual orientation, i.e., the remaining 10%, were for the most part referred to the reference desk because answers required the use of sources or specialized knowledge not available to the person at the information desk.

3. Requests for General Information (Table 3)

Information about library tours was understandably sought more often during orientation periods, when tours were offered as a matter of course. Averaged over a whole quarter, however, requests for copies of the Library Handbook and floor plans exceeded questions about tours, and over a whole quarter of operation, requests for general information about the library comprised only 2% of all questions, demonstrating that this need is mainly active during the initial weeks of the Fall Quarter, as might be expected.

4. Spatial Orientation Needs (Table 4)

Questions coded in this group were phrased in such a way that the user did not seem in doubt about library regulations, but simply needed to locate known facilities. In all three data sets these locations questions were evenly distributed among the following: 1) facilities located in the library, but not specific to library operation, e.g., vending machines, telephones, restrooms; 2) library service units and related physical components, e.g., reserve room, card catalog, cashier's office, stacks, microfilm room; and 3) library resources in the form of materials sought by geographic area collection or call number. This information is already available to library patrons in the form of graphics, handouts, posting, etc.; nevertheless, a human source seems to be preferred. The most frequently sought facilities in order of frequency are photocopiers, restrooms, telephones, the reserve room, and materials by call number, followed by money changers, typewriters, lost and found, the card catalog,[11] stacks, microfilms, cashier, interlibrary loan, and special collections.

Subsequent to the periods of data collection, about the end of

October 1977, Directory and Information Cubes were set up in the entranceway on the main floor and each reading room, to improve graphic assistance. Inasmuch as no follow-up study has been conducted since these directional aids were installed their impact is not known; but there is reason to suppose that they alleviated at least some of the directional problems of users.[12] Periodic studies similar to this one could be conducted to monitor change in the situation.

5. Procedural Orientation Needs (Table 5)

Most of the questions about library operations relating to administrative procedures and regulations fall into three groups and there is no significant difference among the three data sets in this regard. The three groups are: hours of the library, privileges, and locker rental. Information regarding library hours, like the location of common facilities, is already available in the form of a handout and graphic display. Locker rental policies and procedures for obtaining a library card applicable to the library's primary clientele, i.e., students, staff, and faculty of the university, could be emphasized in library tours and in university-wide information packets normally distributed at the beginning of each academic year.

6. Reference Questions

On the questionnaire provided to staff members serving at the information desk was a category "Catalog assistance/Referred to Reference Department"--hash marks here were counted, and, in addition, questions recorded in the narrative portion which were judged to require professional expertise to answer, e.g., how to determine holdings and locations of periodicals, how to find materials by type (theses, college catalogs, newspapers, dictionaries,

government documents, indexes, maps), how to find materials by subject (English, music, social sciences, business) or title, and explanations of the library's catalog or collection, etc., were included in the tally for this category.

Staff at the information desk responded directly to about two-thirds of all questions classed "reference," referring one-third to the reference desk. But overall, reference questions or requests for "intellectual orientation" comprised only 20% of all questions asked at the information desk during orientation weeks. Over a whole quarter of operation the proportion increased to 38%, probably because, over time, there was progressively less need for general information and spatial orientation, while the need for intellectual orientation remained relatively stable and patrons approached the information desk with more complicated matters--although at the low rate of 2.7 reference questions per hour, only 1.8 of which were answered directly.

In an attempt to determine the effect installation of an information desk would have on activity at the reference desk, information regarding transactions at that service point was collected. A record kept by the reference desk staff of total interactions for a period of time overlapped with part of the data set for the information desk during Winter Quarter 1976, i.e., a period of one week. This is obviously a very small sample for comparative purposes, and any conclusions which may be drawn on the basis of it will be, at best, tentative and require further verification. No records of reference activity by other staff members normally offering such service, e.g., Bibliographer, Area Specialist, etc., were kept while the information desk was in operation, so the effect of this service on these other, dispersed reference outlets is unknown.

| In Operation | Total ques answered directly | Avg. # per day | Type: reference | Type: nonreference |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reference Desk only Jan 19-23 | 775 | 155 | 649 | 126 |
| Reference Desk & Info. Desk Jan 26-30 | 1236 | 241.4 | 811 | 396 |
| Reference Desk Jan 26-30 | 861 | 172.2 | 719 | 142 |
| Info. Desk Jan 26-30 | 346 | 69.2 | 92<br>29 referred | 254 |

Data presented in this table suggest that the information desk did not deflect service from the reference desk as might be expected; rather, the volume of service at reference increased during the period of tandem operations for which data is available. With both services the average number of questions asked per day rose from 155 to 241.4--and even allowing for a large margin of error due to the small sample this is a significant increase. The effect of the information desk on reference department service during orientation weeks is unknown since no records were kept by the reference staff, but it probably would deflect a large portion of nonreference questions asked during that period and also provide a substantial additional service by directing patrons to appropriate reference service points within the library--especially since the General Reference Department is relatively sequestered and not within view from the entrance-way where the information desk is located.[13]

7. Frequency Distribution of Questions

The data for Winter Quarter 1976, i.e., the first period of operation

and data collection, shows that peak demand hours are between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m., and this pattern is consistent with findings of other comparable studies.[14] Hours of operation were adjusted several times during the quarter on the basis of periodic analysis of the completed data collection forms to determine the time-frame in which the heaviest demand occurred; and during the latter part of the full-quarter experiment as well as in subsequent periods of operation, information desk services were offered between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. only.

A frequency distribution of the average number of questions asked per hour over weeks of the quarter shows a predictable, steady decline over the course of the term to a nadir at the eighth and ninth weeks of the quarter. A less predictable, but nonetheless interesting and useful trend is evident from the frequency distribution of the average number of questions asked per hour over days of the week, which shows a tendency to decline through the week, with the highest use occurring on Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday, and falling off on Thursday and Friday. This pattern was constant whether considering data from the orientation period samples alone, whole quarter sample, or aggregate of all samples.

8. Total Questions Asked (Table 1)

The total number of questions asked during Fall Orientation 1977 (2056) is more than twice the total asked during the preceding year's orientation (938), and this is most likely due to the fact that in 1977 the library was charged with responsibility for preparing photo I.D. cards for students, and thus every registered student necessarily passed through the lobby of Regenstein Library, and many stood there for some time in long lines.

The information desk fielded about 27 questions per hour in 1977 and 18 per hour in 1976 during the orientation periods, and of these 20% or 5.4 and 3.7 questions per hour respectively were referred to the Reference Department.

The total number of questions asked during a high use orientation period (Fall 1977--2056) almost equals, however, the total asked over the whole of Winter Quarter 1976 (2545). The frequency of questions falls to 7.2 per hour, however, when the total for the whole quarter is averaged. Considering the fact that part of these were referred to the reference desk, this level of demand would hardly justify staffing the desk throughout the quarter. An average of five questions per hour, for the most part dealing with locations, could be fielded easily by regular service units--assuming that staff in these units were prepared--or answered by other means such as improved graphics, handouts, the library manual, etc. The volume of questions during orientation weeks in Fall Quarter, then, particularly when registration procedures take place in the library, would justify provision of an information desk in the center of the lobby for at least two weeks.

## Conclusions

The goal of this study and others like it is to improve aspects of library service at low cost and to increase the productivity of current staff in their primary roles, by making changes on the basis of expressed needs for specific types of library service. Particularly, the installation of an information desk, in many large academic libraries with decentralized systems of reference service, is a means of meeting users' needs for simple, directional information while freeing reference staff for more demanding

inquiries which require their professional expertise. Although generalized studies have found many academic libraries to have this kind of service point, the utility of an information desk is contextual; individual libraries must decide from empirical research and observation what the parameters of its local utility are, considering the physical layout of service units, sophistication of users, priorities in library service, and so on. As Harrelson says,

> Whether or not a large library establishes or continues an information desk depends largely on how well the directional, instructional, and/or simple reference functions are being served or can be served by other units in the library.[15]

The study by Seng also demonstrates that information needs are not static within a library environment; they change with altered circumstances such as new construction and increased enrollments.[16]

Kleiner recommended in 1968 that staff at the information desk be professional,[17] and Harrelson found this to be the practice in many academic libraries.[18] However in light of the nature of the service actually provided at such a desk as determined in subsequent studies[19] including this one, a professional librarian is not needed, particularly when referrals are possible and the desk is clearly designated as a referral point--a kind of switching center--in the reference structure. One library which staffed its information desk with student assistants enforced this concept by the simple expedient of a rule which precluded the staff at the information desk

from telling a patron that the library lacked the information requested.[20] The data collected in this study confirms the view that a high percentage of patron needs addressed at the information desk can be satisfied directly by staff members who are trained for the task but do not have specialized knowledge or authority. The functions of the desk are important as a means of facilitating library use, but they are "basically subprofessional in nature," and require mainly a friendly, courteous person who is prepared to answer directional questions.[21] Equally important is the use of the desk to free professional reference librarians for more substantive work which engages their specialized training and experience with sources and techniques of information retrieval. The information desk is one of many examples in libraries where functions previously performed by professionals could be adequately and competently handled by nonprofessionals. The advantages of releasing professionals from routine tasks where possible, in order to utilize their skills and training more efficiently, are demonstrated in the example of Sangamon State University Library as described by Dillon.[22]

Besides appropriate staffing the other major dimension of directional information service which requires local definition is duration. The information desks in academic libraries surveyed by Harrelson were all permanent service units staffed during the day from Monday through Friday, and 75% were also staffed during evenings and weekends;[23] while Kleiner recommends a "minimum of nine hours daily."[24] Sophisticated techniques have been applied to the problem of scheduling services in libraries, and the study by Rouse and Rouse[25] specifically addresses the problem of scheduling an information desk. However, empirical data on the demand for a particular service--even data with few variables taken into account such

that compiled for this study--can enable library managers to make informed negative decisions as well as design improved services. In spite of the fact that the University of Chicago Library fits the description of a typical academic library in which an information desk may be expected to provide significant service, for example, the data in this study show that demonstrable need for this service is limited to a few weeks a year. Apparently the need for location and orientation in this library does not warrant a permanent service and can be satisfied by improved impersonal aids such as graphics. The experiment thus resulted in proposals for a greatly modified service scaled to empirically determined local needs.

Footnotes

1. William A. Heinlen, "Using Student Assistants in Academic Reference," RQ 15,4:323-25 (Summer 1976); Jeffrey St. Clair and Rao Aluri, "Staffing the Reference Desk: Professionals or Nonprofessionals?" Journal of Academic Librarianship 3,3:149-53 (July 1977); Edward C. Jestes, "Why Waste Professional Time on Directional Questions?" in Proceedings of the Symposium on Measurement of Reference, New York City, July 8, 1974 (Chicago, ALA, 1974); Mary Seng, "Reference Service Upgraded; Using Patrons' Reference Questions," Special Libraries 69,1:21-8 (January 1978).
2. Jane P. Kleiner, "The Information Desk: the Library's Gateway to Service," College and Research Libraries 29,6:496-501 (November 1968); Larry E. Harrelson, "Large Libraries and Information Desks," College and Research Libraries 35,1:21-7 (January 1974).
3. Harrelson, p. 22.
4. All units of the Public Services Division were invited to submit information on 3 x 5 cards for the initial file based on their previous experience with patron's questions and to provide appropriate filing headings. These were then put into a single file and placed at the desk along with a supply of blank cards. Persons staffing the desk were asked to add to the file based on questions received for which they could not find answers in the existing file and to make appropriate corss references when requested information wasin the file, but under a heading not readily apparent from the questions as phrased by a patron. This resulted in a growing and increasingly useful and accessible file of information about the library.
5. Kleiner.

6. Cf. St. Clair and Aluri, p. 153.
7. Cf. St. Clair and Aluri, p. 149.
8. St. Clair and Aluri, Heinlen, Harrelson.
9. Seng, p. 24.
10. Heinlen, p. 323; Harrelson, p. 24; St. Clair and Aluri, p. 153.
11. It should be noted here that while asking the question the patron is within fifteen feet of and usually facing the card catalog which occupies a significant portion of the main floor of the library. This fact should serve as a caution against assuming a priori that anything about a library is so obvious that no provision for information about it is necessary. The practical questions are: how many people may require information, what kind, and how best to provide what is required.
12. Cf. Seng, p. 21.
13. Improvement and increase in reference service was also found by Heinlen, p. 325.
14. Harrelson, p. 23; William B. Rouse and Sandra H. Rouse, "Use of a Librarian/Consultant Team to Study Library Operations," College and Research Libraries 34,5:242-48 (September 1973).
15. Harrelson, p. 27.
16. Seng, p. 24.
17. Kleiner, p. 500.
18. Harrelson, p. 25.
19. Heinlen, p. 323; St. Clair and Aluri, p. 153; Harrelson.
20. Harrelson, p. 24.
21. Harrelson, p. 26.
22. Howard W. Dillon, "Organizing the Academic Library for Instruction," Journal of Academic Librarianship 1,4:4-7 (September 1975); also cf. Jestes.

23. Harrelson, p. 23.

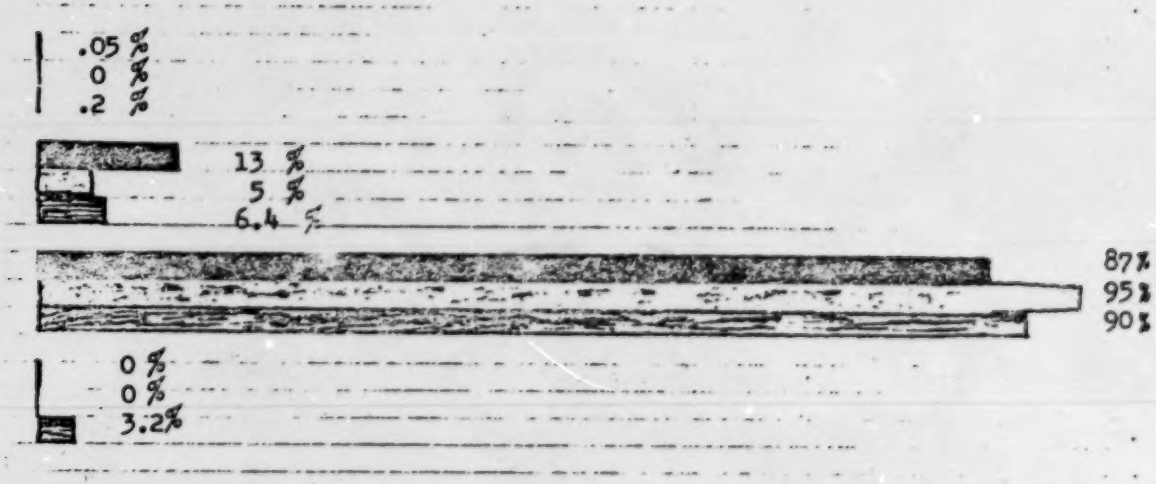
24. Kleiner, p. 500.

25. Rouse and Rouse, p. 243.

## ALL QUESTIONS ASKED AT INFORMATION DESK

Totals

Fall 1977 (orientation) = 2056
Fall 1976 (orientation) = 938
Winter 1976 (quarter) = 2545




[1]Concerning other libraries in the area, or matters not related to university operations.

[2]Concerning the location of other university buildings, class schedules, registration and I.D. card validation.

[3]Any questions about the location of library services or physical components, procedures and regulations regarding library use, reference questions and instruction in library use.

[4]Comments, suggestions, or compliments, i.e., non-questions.

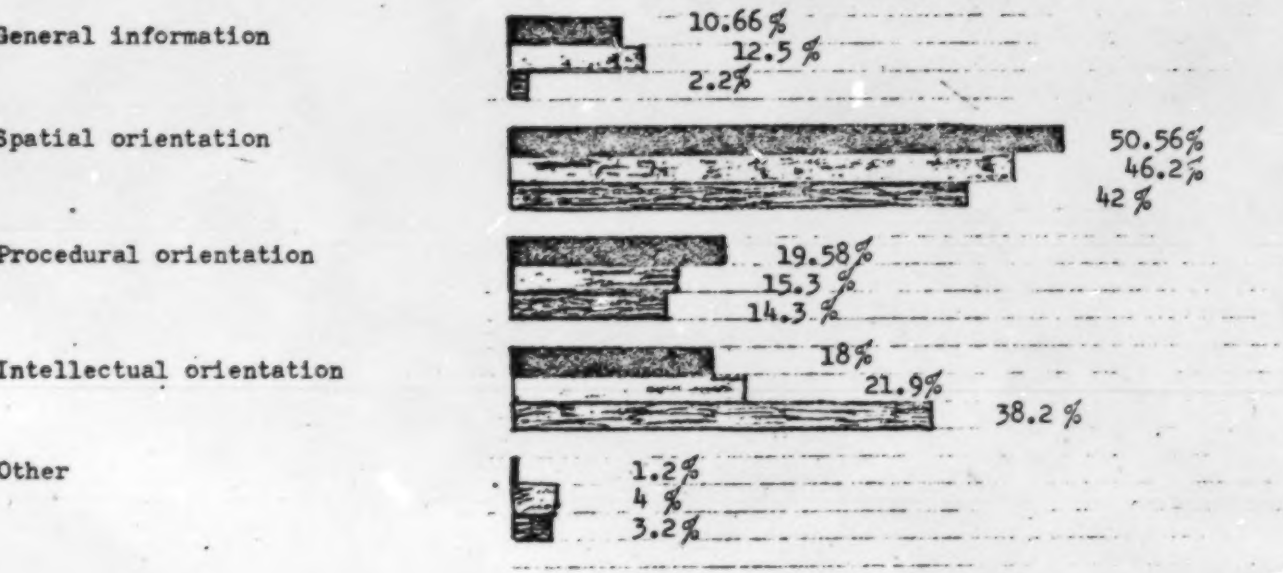


Fall 1977 Orientation Fall 1976 Orientation Winter 1976

TABLE 2

Questions about the Library

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| FO 77 | 1782 | = 87% of Total [2056] |
| FO 76 | 894 | = 95% of Total [938] |
| WQ 76 | 2293 | = 90% of Total [2545] |




[1]Requests for a copy of the Library Handbook, information regarding tours, and requests for floor plans.

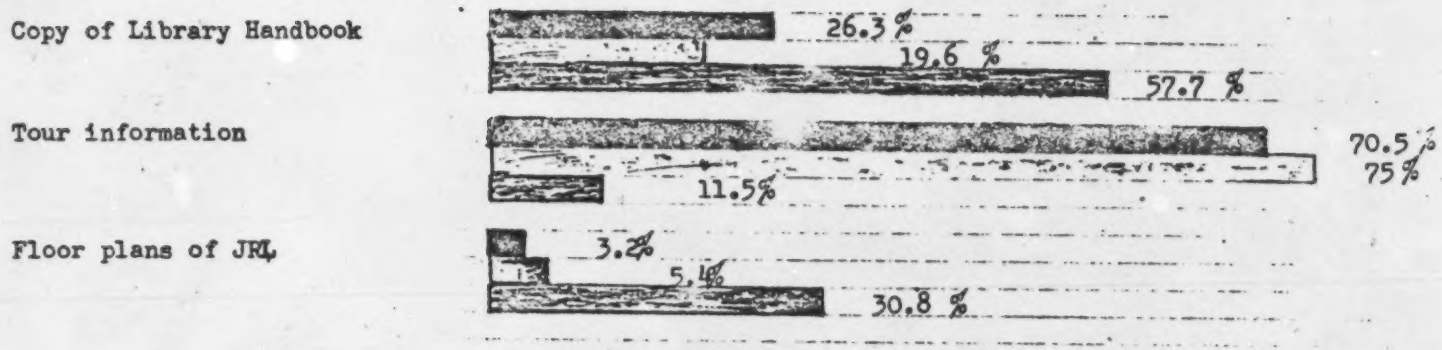
[2]Questions as to the location of floors, rooms, or equipment; or library services and related physical components (e.g., reserve dept., photo-dup., card catalog, stacks); or materials by subject (e.g., area collections or specific call numbers).

[3]Questions about library regulations and privileges, e.g., hours of service, borrowing, renewing, recalling a book, locker rental regulations, access for spouses or non-university people.

[4]Most of these questions were referred to the Reference Dept., concerning catalog use, for example, and include how to find holdings and locations of periodicals or types of reference tools, how to find a book review, a journal article, or a particular book.

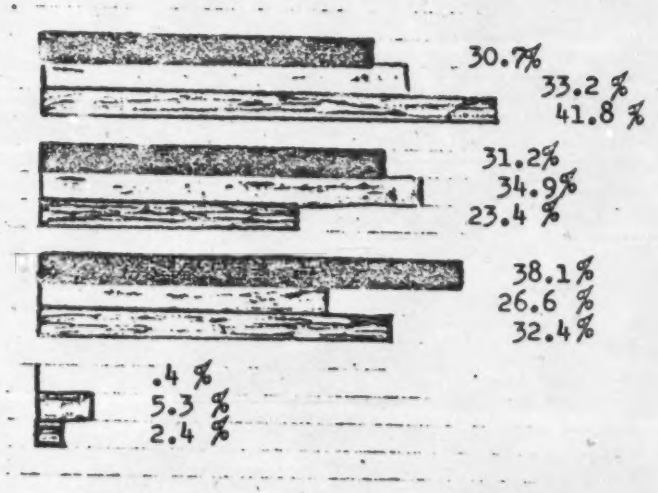
## Requests for General Information About the Library

FO 77 190 = 9.2% of Total [2056]
FO 76 112 = 11.9% of Total [938]
WQ 76 52 = 2 % of Total [2545]



## Questions Relating to Spatial Orientation :: "Where is X?"*

FO 77 901 = 43.8% of Total [2056]
FO 76 413 = 44% of Total [938]
WQ 76 963 = 37.8% of Total [2545]




*Presumes user knows X is possible, what it is, or how to do it.

[1]Vending machines, photocopiers, money changers, smoking areas, telephones, typewriters, restrooms, etc.

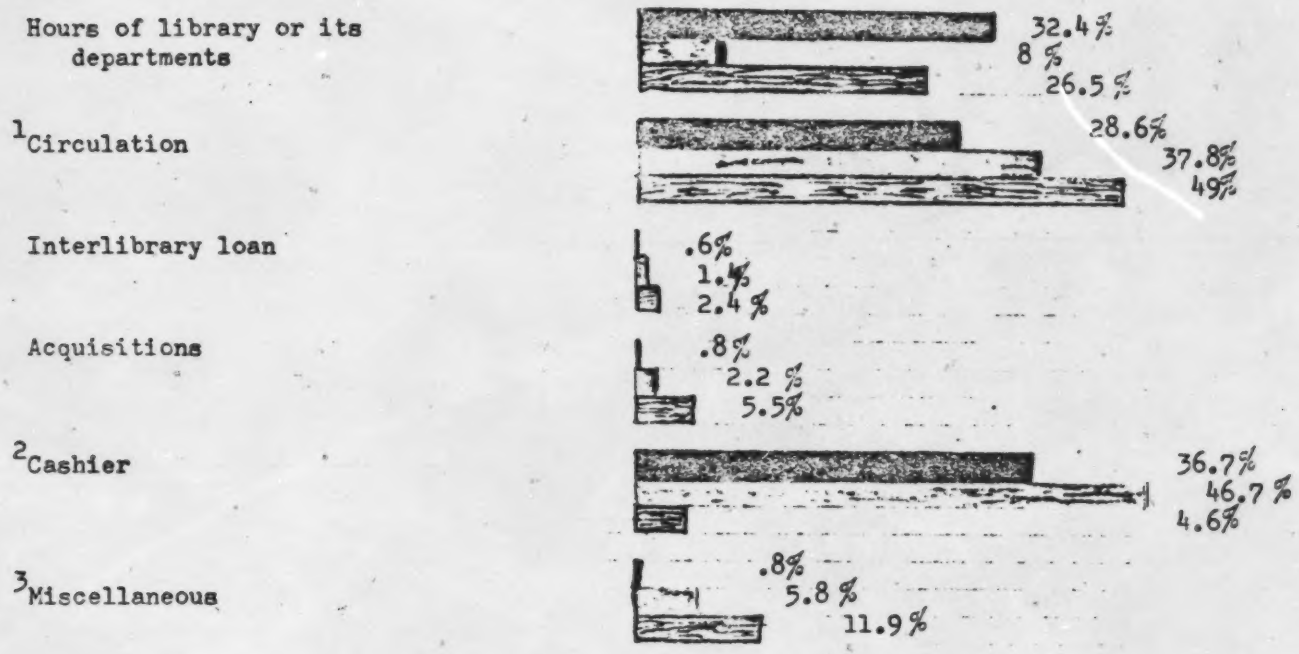
[2]Particularly reserve; also, card catalog, cashier, circulation, microfilm, stacks, a particular staff member, etc.

[3]Far East, Middle East, HQ's, PK's, etc.

Fall 1977 Orientation | Fall 1976 Orientation | Winter 1976

Questions Relating to Procedural Orientation :: "Can I do X here and how?"*

FO 77 349 = 17% of Total [2056]
FO 76 137 = 14.6 of Total [938]
WQ 76 328 = 12.9% of Total [2545]




*I.e., what is possible in parameters of JRL's regulations.

[1]Particularly privileges; also, loan periods, book return, reserve room use, masterfile function, fine payment, etc.

[2]Particularly locker rental rules; also, reserving faculty studies, etc.

[3]Whether food may be taken to faculty studies, whether photocopying may be charged to accounts, etc.

Fall 1977 Orientation Fall 1976 Orientation Winter 1976